

February 26, 2003

WASHINGTON STATE ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY ENGINEERS

The Washington State Association of County Engineers will be celebrating its centennial anniversary in the year “2006” -- two years before the County Commissioners Association will be celebrating their centennial! Yes, in 1906, seven elected engineers from counties across the state, met in northern Yakima and agreed to establish an association for the County Engineers.

The earliest County Engineers were frequently elected to their positions and the title of County “Engineer” was often used along with the title of County “Surveyor”. In many of the counties, the first professionals to work in this capacity were surveyors. Their official responsibilities were “the establishment of alignments and cost estimates for new roads and bridges”. However, some of their unofficial responsibilities were far more interesting and humorous. Many of these stories involved some of the more notorious behavior that has become the “stuff of legends”.

The development of a new roads system 100 years ago was no small feat. The state’s first citizens and settlers relied upon the state’s abundant waterways for their transportation needs. As growth changed from those of the transient hunters or trappers to that of established communities with surrounding farms, the need to develop the farm to market roads became apparent. This responsibility fell completely to the counties (and those few incorporated cities) and the professionals that worked as their engineers. The first roads were extensions of the waterway systems. They provided connections from the shipping terminals and docks to the adjoining farms, mines and timber lands.

Cars were starting to appear on the roads in the state about this time. However, in 1904, it was likely the introduction of the first trucks, with the potential commercial opportunities, that provided the catalyst that resulted in the construction of the road systems as we know them today. Since that time, the County Engineer’s responsibilities have evolved into a multitude of diverse (and sometimes amusing) tasks.

During the Great Depression era, some the Federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects were administered by the local County Engineers. The WPA program was established to provide a maximum employment effort for those people willing to work, during a time of essentially no jobs. One of the local County Engineers (through the WPA program) had the responsibility for the collection and removal of driftwood from the beaches within that county. This proved to be as effective as jousting with windmills and, in retrospect, probably not one of the high water marks of the profession (no pun intended)!

More recently, the County Engineers' responsibilities have involved tasks ranging from operation of water, sewer and stormwater utilities to the position of "County Dog-catcher". As we, the residents of this state, have changed our needs, the County Engineers of the state have tried to adapt and provide professional services, as needed.

Here we are today, looking back at nearly 100 years of service from the Washington State Association of County Engineers. I have to wonder what our descendants will think (and feel) as they look back and reflect upon the legacy of our work and contributions in the next 100 years.

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